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ABSTRACT

In an effort to fill a perceived gap in research concerning the relationship between cultural knowledge and second language proficiency, a study was undertaken with foreign students of English as a Second Language (ESL). The subjects were 30 college juniors in a variety of disciplines taking an English world literature class. Subjects were administered a 50-item multiple choice test on general knowledge about American culture that focused on values, customs, media, politics, arts, and economy. The test was validated with American students. A week after taking the test, the subjects were administered a standardized written test of English proficiency and oral proficiency was measured. Results indicate a strong correlation between cultural knowledge, written proficiency, and oral skills. Since none of the students had taken a course in American culture, it is assumed that cultural and linguistic knowledge were acquired simultaneously. Variability in the correlations for each student was not found to be related to length of stay in the United States, nationality, or college major, but was statistically related to exposure to mass media, both print and visual/aural. It is concluded that media exposure may help develop both second language skills and target cultural knowledge. Contains seven references. (MSE)

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Cultural Knowledge and Language Ability: The Siamese Twins

The past decade has seen some very informative studies on the importance of cultural understanding in second language (L2) acquisition and on ways to incorporate the teaching of culture in L2 instruction to help students develop communicative competence in the target language (Byrd, 1986; Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993; Kramsch, 1993, Valdes, 1986; Wolfson, 1989; Wu and Stephens, 1991). Thanks to the efforts of these scholars, more and more educators have become aware that cultural knowledge is crucial in language learning/teaching and that L2 acquisition must go hand in hand with second culture acquisition because, to use Wu and Stephens' words, one has to "be bicultural to be bilingual" (p. 29).

Yet, our awareness does not seem to have been validated by any real empirical research. Of all the studies on the issue so far, none, to my knowledge, has statistically demonstrated a close relationship between cultural knowledge and language ability. Most scholars employed either anecdotical or hypothetical situations to show the importance of culture in language acquisition, i.e., situations where an L2 speaker failed to communicate with a native speaker not because of language

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problem (linguistically the person was quite competent) but because of lack of understanding of the culture. Studies like this certainly help to illustrate how cultural knowledge is indispensable in L2 learning, but they simultaneously seem to suggest that cultural knowledge and language ability are two distinct skills/abilities that are--or can be--acquired separately. Two questions thus remain to be answered. Are cultural knowledge and language ability two closely related interdependent variables or two distinctive skills? Are the two often acquired or can the two be acquired separately?

One reason that no empirical study has been done on the two questions is, I believe, the tremendous difficulty involved in measuring cultural knowledge. Even though we all agree that cultural understanding is crucial in L2 acquisition, we do not seem to have a consensus on what cultural knowledge includes. Lack of a clear definition of culture, in turn, makes writing a cultural test a very challenging, if not an entirely impossible, task. However, that problem should not stop us from doing studies that are not only important but necessary if we want to have a better and more sure understanding of the relationship between cultural knowledge and language acquisition. More importantly, better understanding on the issue may in turn have significant implications for our teaching practice. Hence a study was designed in an attempt to answer the two questions raised above. In the study, cultural knowledge was to be measured by performance on a cultural test; language ability was

to be measured by performance 1) on TOEFL and 2) on an oral proficiency test.

The Study

Method, Subjects and Procedures

Thirty international students enrolled in a junior level English World Literature class were recruited as the subjects of the study in the middle of a semester. The students were not in the same field of study (their majors included arts, sciences, and business). They were taking the course as partial fulfillment of foundation course requirements. All the students had been in the States for two or three years when the study was conducted.

A test on American culture with fifty multiple-choice questions was designed (see Appendix I for sample questions). Each question was worth 2 points, which amounted to a total of 100 points. Several important sources on cultural tests (Levine and Adelman, 1982; Valette, 1986) were consulted in the designing process. Followed closely was Valette's suggestion that a cultural test should "touch all aspects of culture: the people's way of life as well as the geographic, historical, economic, artistic and scientific aspects of the target culture" (p. 182). This principle of inclusiveness in writing cultural tests should be closely observed because this inclusiveness will compensate our lack of a consensus on what culture covers. The designed test covered almost all aspects of American culture with a focus

on values, customs, media, politics, arts, and economy. The test was first given to 30 domestic students as a pretest to make sure that the questions in the test measure only general cultural knowledge. The results were postive since the mean score was 96 with a standard deviation of 2. As a move to further stengthen the test, the five questions that proved most difficult for the domestic students were replaced with more general questions.

This revised cultural test was then administered to the subjects of the study. A week later, these international students took the TOEFL. Then an evaluation of the students' oral proficiency was conducted. A scale of 1 to 6 was employed for the evaluation with 6 being highest and 1 being lowest proficiency. The ratings were based on the students' performance on one 10 minute in class presentation and one five minute face to face outside class interview with the instructor and the author. The presentation was rather formal where the students gave their critical reading or interpretation of a piece of literature they enjoyed most; the interview was rather casual and somewhat personal with questions being mostly about: 1) the students' background and 2) their response to life in America in comparison to their life home. We gave the students each a score on the presentation and a score on the interview. The average of the two scores was then computed as their oral proficiency score. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were then calculated to determine the relations between the three variables, that is, between the students' scores on the cultural

test, scores on TOEFL and scores on the oral proficiency test.

Results and Discussion

The correlation coefficient was 0.813 between the cultural test and TOEFL, 0.733 between the cultural Test and the oral proficiency test, and 0.681 between TOEFL and the oral test. All the correlations were significant with $p < 0.001$.[1] The results indicate clearly that the three variables are closely related, especially the first two. Therefore we can say with strong certainty that L2 learners' cultural knowledge and language ability are interdependent. Since the two are so closely related and since none of the students had taken any particular course about American culture, it would be fairly safe to say that the students developed their language ability and cultural knowledge

	CULTURAL TEST	TOEFL	ORAL TEST	MEDIA EXPO
CULTURAL TEST	1.000			
TOEFL	0.813	1.000		
ORAL TEST	0.733	0.681	1.000	
MEDIA EXPO	0.911	0.835	0.710	1.000

All the correlations are very significant with $P < 0.001$

simultaneously, i.e., they obtained their cultural knowledge in the process of picking up the language. It would then not be off the base to infer that the two are usually acquired together. Generally speaking, a proficient L2 speaker will have a fairly good understanding of the L2 culture although the person may have problems communicating appropriately in some isolated situations.

For example, a very fluent diplomat who is competent or can function very well in most situations may have trouble in dating. But that incident alone should not make us doubt the diplomat's overall solid knowledge of the culture and his overall competence in the language.

Then there is the issue of how we account for the difference between the students performance on all the three tests: why some did better than others. Since they all had been here for two or three years, the length of stay in the States was excluded as a likely factor. Then was national origin, major of study, or amount of exposure to the media a factor? Statistical procedures were used in order to anwser the question. No significant difference in performance was found between nationalities by using the T test. In fact, of the thirty students, all except one were from countries in the Far East. No significant difference was found between majors, either. Yet, the amount of exposure to media was found to be a very significant factor. The amount of visual/aural media exposure and that of printed media exposure for each subject was added up and averaged to be the amount of media for that individual. Then the amount of media exposure was correlated with the students scores on the three tests. Significant correlations were found: 0.911 between media expo and the cultural test, 0.835 between media expo and TOEFL, and .710 between media expo and the oral test with $p < 0.001$. The first correlation was extremely high, probably because the cultural test covered many questions that came from the media.

These findings suggest that exposure to both the printed and the visual/aural media may not only enable the students to learn about L2 culture but also help them improve their language ability. While reading or watching whatever they are interested in, L2 students are in the process of acquiring the language without conscious learning. The findings also imply that, although cultural teaching per se may not be necessary, what we teach in the language class should, however, be culturally rich. In other words, we language teachers should work hard to develop and use culturally-rich teaching materials. The media of the target culture/language has proved to be a great source. By the same token, L2 instructors should do whatever they can to encourage their students to know more about L2 culture, a practice that would help the students simultaneously increase their language proficiency.

1. The fact that the correlation between the cultural test and TOEFL is much higher than the other two correlations may support the conclusions of some previous studies that TOEFL is a culturally biased (or culturally rich) test. Yet, I do not think we can write a truly culture-free test because language is part of a culture as many sociolinguists have pointed out all along.

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